

# A HISTORY OF THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE

*Eternal Faith, Eternal People*

LEO TREPP



# Jewish Experience

E T E R N A L   P E O P L E

by LEO TREPP

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*A Journey Into Judaism*

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To my wife Miriam  
and my daughter Susan  
. . . in love

## Preface

**T**his book has been in the making for many years. Started in response to a request by Jewish friends in search of a concise general outline of Judaism, it was given its specific character at the suggestion of my Christian friends, who asked for a work which would explain Judaism in simple words, addressing itself to the intelligent layman. I hope it will serve both. It is no more than an introduction, for Judaism can be fully understood only as it is lived. It is more than a set of dogmas and of principles, more than the sum total of its laws and commandments. It started as a faith. The faith has formed the people, and the people have fashioned their faith in a process of never-ending evolution. Judaism is eternal faith and eternal people, a *living dialogue* between God and the Jew, between the Jew and God, and among the Jew, his fellow Jew, and the world. Its influence upon mankind has been profound.

Judaism proclaims God is absolutely One. In calling Jews to follow Him, it holds out the ideal of wholeness to a world torn by discord, and to individual souls split by inner conflict. Judaism proclaims the coming of the Messiah, and a future in which mankind will be united in brotherhood and peace. In this Messianic ideal it offers an eternal challenge to every human being, calling him to do his utmost in promoting human welfare under God, to push forward the frontiers of human progress, and to toil unceasingly for the improvement of society.

As champion of these ideals, Judaism is vital for mankind. *Shalom* is the goal it envisions for the children of God. Shalom means peace, a peace which is more than the absence of war, for Shalom also means perfection; in Jewish tradition it is a name of God Himself.

Judaism calls for imitation of God. Its history testifies to its convictions. It is a stream, a conversation, which goes on not only between the members of any living generation but between the generations as well. Every Jew speaks to his past, as the past speaks to him. He addresses himself to the future, and the future responds. Judaism speaks to the world, and

has taken the best mankind has to offer to build it into the structure of its own system.

I have tried, therefore, to arrange the ideas of Judaism around a historical framework. This book is not a Jewish history. It is selective in its inclusion of personalities and events, but it follows the historical unfolding of Jewish life and destiny. Whatever happened to the Jews at a given moment in history helped shape their outlook, their prayers and practices, their philosophy and hopes. The creative works of any Jew at any time became part of a living heritage. History, faith, and people cannot be separated, for Judaism sees God as Master of History.

The book has been guided by this principle. The discussion of doctrines and movements, of observances and practices, is introduced at the historical point in the narrative when they reached their fullest expression and concreteness. For example, Jewish holidays, dietary laws, and the "Road of Life" are discussed after an analysis of the Shulhan Arukh, the authoritative code of Jewish law. This had the advantage of permitting quotations from the Shulhan Arukh and earlier works to be introduced. In modern times new approaches to the Shulhan Arukh have evolved, and they are discussed in their historical place. From my own experience as a college teacher I consider this approach to be educationally sound. As far as possible I have permitted the teachers and sages to speak for themselves. These selections, which offer a glimpse of Jewish writing, may lead to further study. Modern works, and those easily available in translation, have been quoted less extensively than those which may be harder to obtain.

Simplicity of presentation has been my primary concern, and has influenced the choice and presentation of subject matter and ideas. In telling my story I have generally not taken a stand in defense or advocacy of specific schools of thought or philosophy. On the other hand, I have tried to include answers to questions most frequently asked.

It is my conviction that Judaism is essentially a religion of reason, and I have emphasized this aspect. I believe that Jewish history, from the Talmud to Hermann Cohen, bears out this assertion. In a sense, this too is a simplification. There are many currents, from mysticism to plain superstition, which can be traced in the stream of evolution. They have affected the character of Judaism without, in my view, changing it fundamentally. This personal conviction should be kept in mind by the reader.

The views and opinions expressed thus are mine. Judaism has no central authority which could certify a work as an official presentation of its ideas, or give it an imprimatur. I have drawn from many sources, learned from many teachers, and I am eternally indebted to all of them. The greatest of them all have been my parents, who surrounded me with love and a home filled with Jewish devotion. My father, in addition, led me into Bible and Talmud. My mother sealed her devotion to Judaism

with her life, dying a Martyr's death in a Nazi camp. I have had inspiring teachers during my rabbinic training, men whose lives testified to their convictions. Men of renown have guided my university studies. Throughout the years my wife has shared with me the trials of life, in a courage born of faith, and in love which has given me strength. In my daughter I envision the future, as she grows up to be American and Jew. Without these influences and many others, the book could not have been written.

I wish to thank Mrs. Keith (Lucy) Evans for her valuable notes to the first draft of the manuscript, representing the views of the intelligent Christian reader. Dr. James Diemer, Director of Napa College, has read the final draft of the manuscript and the proofs, and aided me greatly by his comments. Goodman Library at Napa has been helpful in securing books from many sources; Mr. J. E. James drew some of the original drafts of the maps, and Mr. Karl Kultti transcribed the cantillation of Torah for me. Mr. Bernard Stein of Germany undertook the arduous task of providing me with pictures of German-Jewish historical monuments. I am grateful to all of them, and to many others who have given me encouragement, including my colleagues and students at Napa College and Santa Rosa Junior College, where I teach.

Most of the maps are adaptations of those used in Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957), based on maps in *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, Revised Edition, © 1956 by W. D. Jenkins, The Westminster Press. The Oppenheim Pictures are reprinted through the courtesy of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods.

I would like to thank these other individuals and organizations which provided pictures used in the book: Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland; Blackstone Studios; Supreme Grand Lodge of B'nai B'rith, Robert Shosteck, Curator, B'nai B'rith Committee on Jewish Americana, Washington, D.C.; The Consulate General of Israel; Verlag Eschkol A.-G., Berlin; The Jewish Museum, New York, Frank J. Darmstaedter; The Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Mr. Paul Lippman, Santa Rosa, California; Mr. Alex Liu; B. Manischewitz Company, Newark, New Jersey; Photographie Giraudon, Paris; Schocken Books, Inc.; Herbert S. Sonnenfeld; Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Rheinland-Pfalz Ministerium für Unterricht und Kultus, Oberregierungsrat Schröder, Mainz; Staedtische Kulturinstitute, Worms; The Union of American Hebrew Congregations; and Mr. Roger Levenson for his kind advice.

The Holy Scriptures, © 1917 by the Jewish Publication Society of America, is the translation generally used in this work. I have preferred to use this translation, rather than my own, to show the Christian reader the similarities and differences between the Jewish translation and the authorized Christian ones. I hope to guide the Jewish reader toward

renewed study of the authorized Jewish version from which I have quoted. Sincere appreciation is expressed to the Jewish Publication Society of America for the use of their translation. All other translations from the Hebrew, French, Latin, and German (except when indicated otherwise) are my own.

No part of Jewish experience can be understood out of the context of the whole. I have tried to show this. It is possible to read many of the chapters independently, and the reader may omit sections of greater difficulty, such as philosophy. It is my hope, however, that most readers will approach the work as a whole.

*Leo Trepp*

The first edition of *Eternal Faith, Eternal People* has been so well received that most of its material has been retained. The years since its first appearance have brought developments that have called for updating, which has been undertaken. My most profound appreciation is expressed to Behrman House, who have undertaken the new edition and shown me great courtesy while giving me valuable help. Since the first edition of the book, my daughter Susan has been married to Myron Greenberg, and their son, David Philip was born in 1972. The dedication is extended to them. L.T.



# Contents

<b>Introduction: The Problem of Definition</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 · Biblical Beginnings</b>	<b>4</b>
THE FAMILY	5
THE GOD OF MOSES	8
THE LAND: CLASH OF IDEAL AND REALITY	12
<b>2 · The Prophets and Their Message</b>	<b>15</b>
DEVELOPMENT OF PROPHECY: EARLY PROPHETS	15
<i>Amos: The Idea of Being Chosen · Hosea: The God of Love · Isaiah: Rites and Righteousness—The Vision of the Future · Deuteronomy: Social Justice · Jeremiah: Hope of Return—The Duties of Citizenship · BABYLONIAN EXILE: NEW ANSWERS</i>	25
<i>The Beginning of Liturgy · Ezekiel: Individual Responsibility versus Inherited Sin · The Second Isaiah: Voice of Hope · The End of the Exile</i>	
<b>3 · Return, Restoration, Renaissance</b>	<b>33</b>
STRANGERS AND CONVERTS: THE JEWISH CONCEPT	33
<i>Conversion · Conversion in Historical Perspective · THE COVENANT</i>	36
<i>What We Mean by Torah · Written and Oral Torah · HELLENISM</i>	40
<i>Conflict and Rebellion: The Maccabees · The Inspiration of Greek Thought · THE SECTS: SADDUCEES, ESSENES, PHARISEES</i>	57
<b>4 · The Tannaim</b>	<b>62</b>
THE MEN AND THEIR IDEALS	63
THE PAINTED ONES	72
ANCIENT ROOTS OF ANTI-SEMITISM	74

## 5 · Tenakh: The Holy Scriptures 78

THE DIVISIONS OF THE BIBLE 80    *Torah · N'v'ee-im: Prophets · Ketubim: Collected Writings* · HOW THE TENAKH WAS TRANSMITTED: THE MASORAH 90    HOW THE TENAKH ORIGINATED: MODERN CRITICISM 90  
BIBLE IN TRANSLATION 92

## 6 · The Mishnah 93

ORGANIZATION OF THE MISHNAH: THE ORDERS AND THEIR CONTENT 95    EXCERPTS FROM THE MISHNAH: SANHEDRIN 98    *Palestine after the Mishnah*

## 7 · The Babylonian Talmud 102

BACKGROUND OF THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD 102  
*Mishnah and Gemara: The Talmud · Method and Organization* · BABYLONIAN JEWRY AFTER COMPLETION OF THE TALMUD 106    SEFARDIC AND ASHKENASIC JEWRY 108

## 8 · Prayer and the Prayer Book 109

WHAT WE MEAN BY PRAYER 109    THE BERAKHAH 111    STRUCTURED WORSHIP: PERIODS OF PRAYER 112    THE STRUCTURE OF THE MAIN PRAYERS 113  
*The Morning Prayer · The Nineteenth Psalm and the Pattern of Jewish Worship · Amidah: The Concerns of Petition · More of the Pledge of Allegiance · The Afternoon Prayer · The Evening Prayer · On Retiring* · THE STRUCTURE OF WORSHIP 120    PUBLIC AND PRIVATE WORSHIP: WHAT IS A CONGREGATION? 122    CHANTS, SINGERS, AND POETS 122    THE SIGNS: AUDIO-VISUAL REMINDERS 125    *Tallit · Tefillin · Mezuzah* · WORSHIP AND THE JEWISH PERSONALITY 128

## 9 · Dissent, Disruption, Dialogue 129

PROLOGUE: PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA 129    JUDAISM IN DISSENT 133    EARLY CHRISTIANITY: THE JEWISH VIEWPOINT 136    *The Life of Jesus · The Ministry of Paul · The Period of Dissociation · The Split is Completed · The Dialogue is Resumed*

## 10 · Challenge and Response 142

SPAIN 142 *Hasdai and Samuel the Prince · Gabirol · Judah Halevi · Moses Maimonides · The End of Spanish Jewry · CENTRAL EUROPE 152 The Life of Ashkenasic Jewry · Synagogue Buildings · FRENCH-GERMAN JEWRY RISES TO EMINENCE 163 Gershom ben Judah · Rashi · THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: THE CODES 167 The Shulhan Arukh · Authority and Functions of the Orthodox Rabbi*

## 11 · The Jewish Year 172

THE JEWISH CALENDAR 172 THE SABBATH 176 *Work Prohibition · Traditional Sabbath Observance · THE DAYS OF AWE: HIGH HOLY DAYS 185 Of Days and Seasons and Years · The Ways of Teshubah · Days of Repentance: Preparation · Rosh Hashanah · Yom Kippur: Day of Atone-ment · THE THREE PILGRIMAGE FESTIVALS 196 Suk- kot: Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) · Lights in Winter's Night: Hanukah · The Merry Feast of Purim · Pessah (Passover): Rebirth in Freedom · Shabuot · Days of Mourning*

## 12 · The Road of Life 216

BIRTH 216 *Circumcision · Jewish Names · An Archaic Custom: Pidyon Haben · Education and Bar Mitzvah · Toward Marriage · MARRIAGE 223 Preparation · The Betrothal: First Part of the Marriage Ceremony · Marriage Rites: Second Part of the Marriage Ceremony · MARRIED LIFE 227 Women's Status in Religious Law · Divorce · SICKNESS AND DEATH IN TRADITIONAL OBSERVANCE 231 Health and Sickness · As Death Approaches · Preparing the Dead · Burial · The Period of Mourning · Yahrzeit · DIETARY LAWS 234 Purpose and Background · The Laws · THE WEARING OF THE HAT 239*

## 13 · Forces and Counterforces 242

*An Example: Venice · Luther · England · Eastern Europe · Messianism · The "Gaon" of Vilna · The Baal Shem: The Hasidim · Moses Mendelssohn · Baruch Spinoza*

## 14 · Hasidism 250

*Ezekiel* · *German Hasidism: Judah Hahasid and His Followers* ·  
*Zohar: The Book of Radiance* · *Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572)* ·  
*Hasidism in Russia and Poland* · *The Impact of Hasidism*

## 15 · Darkness and Light 260

THE AGONY OF RUSSIAN JEWRY 260    THE DAWN OF  
 THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT 263

## 16 · On Jewish Philosophy 265

SAADIA: THE BOOK OF DOCTRINES AND BELIEFS 266  
*Of His Ideas* · JUDAH HALEVI: THE KUSARI 269  
 MOSES MAIMONIDES (1135-1204) 272 *Prophet and  
 Philosopher* · *God* · *Just Average Good People* · *The Meaning  
 of the Commandments* · *After Maimonides* · MOSES MEN-  
 DELSSOHN (1729-1786) 281 *Background* · *Life* · *Religious  
 Philosophy* · *Nature's God, His Ways, and His Works* · *Bibli-  
 cal Revelations and Miracles* · *Why Judaism?* · *Mendelssohn's  
 Influence*

## 17 · French Revolution and Aftermath 291

NAPOLÉON ORGANIZES A SANHEDRIN 292    JEWS AND  
 THE CONGRESS OF VIENNA 293    THE STATE OR-  
 GANIZES THE JEWISH COMMUNITY 294    AN EX-  
 AMPLE: OLDENBURG 294    REORGANIZATION AND  
 THE DIVISION OF MINDS 297    THE SCIENCE OF  
 JUDAISM 298

## 18 · Conflicts and Conferences 299

THREE GIANTS 300    *Samuel Holdheim (1806-1860)* · *Abra-  
 ham Geiger (1810-1874)* · *Zachariah Frankel (1801-1875)* · CON-  
 TROVERSY: REFORM AND CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM 302  
*Geiger and Holdheim* · *Frankel* · NEO-ORTHODOXY 306  
*Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888)* · *The Character of German  
 Orthodoxy* · *Hirsch's Philosophy* · OF DENOMINATIONS AND  
 IDEOLOGIES: A SURVEY 314

**19 · The New Anti-Semitism      316**

PRESSURES AND RESULTS    317      CONTRASTS    320

**20 · Zionism      321**

CULTURAL ZIONISM: AHAD HA-AM    323    *Ahad Ha-Am's Life · His Ideas* · POLITICAL ZIONISM: THEODOR HERZL    326    *Herzl and the Dreyfus Affair · Herzl Learns a Lesson · The Jewish State · Reaction and Opposition* · THE PANGS OF BIRTH    330    GROWING PAINS    332

**21 · An Age of Maturity      335**

HERMANN COHEN (1842-1918)    337    *Life · Cohen's Answer to Basic Questions; Judaism and Christianity · God, World, and Jew · In Quest of Perfection · The Soul · Sin and Repentance · The Neighbor* · FRANZ ROSENZWEIG (1886-1929)    347    *Of His Life · Of His Thought · The Star of Redemption* · MARTIN BUBER: LIFE OF THE DIALOGUE    355    *Life · Of His Thought · THE END OF GERMAN JEWRY*    364    Leo Baeck

**22 · Enter America      367**

BEGINNINGS    367    *In Colonial America · Citizens of the United States · The Problems for Judaism* · GERMAN IMMIGRATION    375    ADJUSTMENT AND REFORM    377    *Isaac Leeser (1806-1868) · Isaac Meyer Wise (1819-1900): Master Builder, Father of Reform · The Development of Reform Judaism*

**23 · Migration from Eastern Europe      387**

*Problems of Transition · Parents and Children · Prejudice · Henrietta Szold* · CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM    393    *Solomon Schechter (1850-1915)* · RECONSTRUCTIONISM    397    *Mordecai Kaplan · The Concept of God · Jewish Religion and Practice · The Character of Reconstructionism · Reconstructionism: An Example of Judaism's Flexibility* · ORTHODOXY    402    *The Character of Orthodoxy · Orthodoxy and Israel* · SOME PROBLEMS OF AMERICAN JEWRY    406    *The Impact of Circumstances · Forces of Environment and History · Cooperation in Faith, Key to the Future* · THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT    409    THE THRUST OF THOUGHT AND TASK    412 (Cont.):

SOME PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS	414	<i>In Worship • Sabbath • Wearing of Hats in the Synagogue • Divorce • Agunah • Dietary Laws • Prayer and the Prayer Book</i>
-----------------------------	-----	---

<b>The Next Step: A Selected Bibliography</b>	<b>420</b>
---	------------

<b>Appendix</b>	<b>430</b>
-----------------	------------

<b>Index</b>	<b>435</b>
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# Introduction: The Problem of Definition

**I**s there *one* nation on earth like Thy people Israel? (From Sabbath afternoon worship)." Deep and powerful has been the impact of Judaism on its adherents. It has been a force which has molded men. We need mention but one of its commandments, observance of the Sabbath; it has had the power to transform the hunted and persecuted outcasts of history into princes—for twenty-four hours, once every week. They acquired a new soul, which gave them peace amidst storms; they had the quietness of heart to meditate on God's greatness, for He had created them a unique people on earth. Thus did a faith reach into the very marrow of its faithful, to mold them and to form them, to give them vision and courage and the unconquerable urge to be God's co-workers in the shaping of a better world. Our purpose is to trace how this came about—to show how Judaism expresses itself in beliefs and doctrines, in observances and customs, in law and in folkways.

There are close to 14 million Jews in the world today, living in every part of the globe, among members of every race. Although most Jews are Caucasians, there are also Negro Jews, Indian Jews, and some Jews who are Japanese. From the very beginning of Jewish history there has been a mixture of many families on earth united by one common bond, so it is an error to speak of a Jewish race. Are they then a religious group? They are a religious communion, but they are more than that. Many Jews do not uphold any religious doctrines, yet are proud of their Jewish-

ness. Are they a nation in a political sense? *Some* Jews find themselves organized as a nation. Israel is a sovereign nation on its own free soil. Jews in Russia carry identity cards which designate them as Jewish *nationals*, and are presumed to be afflicted with "negative national traits." Victims of constant pressures and severe discrimination, they are not allowed to find solace in their faith, merge into the oblivion of the majority; a limited number may now emigrate. In the western world, where the Jews consider themselves primarily a *religion*, the denominations of orthodoxy, conservatism, and reform have developed, and the synagogues form religious centers of Jewish life.

Yet there is one element that elevates Jewry in all lands beyond the character of a merely religious fellowship, and that is the sense of kinship and concern which Jews feel for each other. There is no political bond between Jews in various lands, only the spirit of belongingness. The Bible expresses the nature of the Jews when it speaks of "Bet Yisrael," the House of Israel.<sup>1</sup> Jews form a family linked by common experiences, a common history, and a common spiritual heritage. A family acquires its character not by the house in which it dwells, but by the spirit which unites it. The family unit includes those at home and abroad, those who join by vow of marriage, and the children born of married unions. Whoever partakes of the spirit is part of the family. As the members share in common hopes and ideals, they develop the bond of love which holds them together. Jewry is a family often torn by disagreements, but with the firm base of love as its foundation.

The will to survive has its roots in Jewish conviction that Judaism and the Jewish people are the people of the Covenant, called by God to function in a unique way within mankind as a whole. The Covenant created the bond between the Jews and God, thence between Jew and Jew; it has become so internalized that even those who may be unaware of its power have retained their allegiance to the Jewish people as its embodiment. Out of the Covenant we come to understand also the place and function of Jewish law. Law is the condensation of the spirit of the Covenant into action; it is both imposed and organic; it grew out of the encounter with God and out of the spirit of the Jewish people and its needs, hence it evolved. It has served as unifying bond among Jews and contributed to their survival without making them into a legalistic community. It has deepened the spirit of unity and of purpose—although it has also been an issue of controversy, especially in modern times—calling for an active response to the divine call, it has served as a life-giving force of self-identification and spiritual awareness. It translated the Covenant into the

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<sup>1</sup> In the Pentateuch we often find the term "B'nai Yisrael," the Children of Israel, signifying an even closer family unity. The term "House of Israel" occurs most frequently among the prophets of the Exile, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They may have wished to impress the idea most forcefully upon the dispersed.



deed, its pledge into the reality of constant performance linking the Jew to God, its hope into an action program that can lead to its fulfillment for the Jew and for mankind.

Of the nearly 14 million Jews, close to six million live in the United States of America, the largest Jewish community in history. (Canada has almost 300,000.) Proud as American citizens, they have become the leaders of world Jewry, giving support and aid, offering spiritual guidance, and at the same time building a unique form of American Jewish religious life. Israel with nearly 2¾ million is the second largest free community, for the three million in Russia are not free. In Europe their number has dwindled. There are 410,000 in England and 550,000 in France, 100,000 in Rumania, 80,000 in Hungary, 40,000 in Belgium, 35,000 in Italy, 30,000 in the Netherlands, 20,000 in Switzerland, 15,000 in Sweden, 8,000 in Austria, and smaller numbers in other countries, although their life, such as among the 6,000 Danish Jews, may be active and flourishing. Only about 9,000 are left of the millions who once lived in Poland, and 30,000 of the once flourishing Jewish community of Germany. No European country is without Jews. In Africa, we find flourishing and prosperous congregations in the South of the continent (125,000), of whom the majority lives in the Republic of South Africa (120,000), while the decreasing population of Jews along the Mediterranean coast exists in poverty. On the Asian continent, outside of Israel, larger Jewish communities are found in Turkey (40,000), Iran (80,000), and in India (15,000). In South America, Brazil (150,000), Argentina (500,000), Uruguay (50,000), Mexico (35,000) and Chile (35,000) have large and well organized congregations, and in Australia (73,000) <sup>2</sup> they form a happy religious group.

Although we will make a careful study of the Jewish people, Judaism can be fully understood only as it is lived. It can be defined only after it is known. Professor Kaplan has called it "an evolving religious civilization."<sup>3</sup> Judaism is constantly changing and growing. It is religious; without its faith in God it would never have come into being, nor would it have continued beyond a few generations. It is civilization, for it includes not only religious doctrines and practices, but forms a way of life. It has created art and philosophy, language and music, folkways and cuisine. It expresses itself for some in a homeland in Israel, for others in secular culture and social service, and for the majority—as in America—in religion. Above all, Judaism cannot be understood without Jews, its living servants, the molders of this civilization.

"Is there one nation . . . like Thy people Israel?"

<sup>2</sup> These figures are based on *American Jewish Year Book 1971*, c. 1971 by The American Jewish Committee and The Jewish Publication Society, New York and Philadelphia.

<sup>3</sup> Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1957). The idea is basic to all of Kaplan's writings and to the Reconstructionist Movement of which he is the founder.